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ABSTRACT

Maternal separation anxiety influences maternal behavior, attitudes about employment, and employment decisions made by mothers. This study examined the relationship between maternal separation anxiety and the number of hours a child was in substitute care. The sample consisted of 44 mothers and their children who ranged in age from 12 to 41 months from 2 urban child care centers. It was expected that maternal separation anxiety and employment related variables would be associated with the type and frequency of behaviors that a mother displayed when interacting with her child at separation and reunion. Results demonstrated relationships between maternal separation anxiety and maternal behavior at reunion. Mothers reporting high separation anxiety and who utilized child care on a less than full-time basis displayed more frequent physically and verbally affectionate behaviors with their children as compared to high anxious/full-time child care mothers. These results suggest that situational and dispositional variables may combine to influence maternal behavior at reunion with the child. The relationships between self-reported maternal separation anxiety and maternal behavior at reunion demonstrated in this study support the validity of the maternal separation anxiety construct. (JBJ)

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Maternal Separation Anxiety and Child Care: Effects on Maternal Behavior

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Maternal separation anxiety influences maternal behavior, attitudes about employment, and employment decisions made by mothers. This study examined the relationship between maternal separation anxiety and the number of hours a child was in substitute care. It was expected that maternal separation anxiety and employment related variables would be associated with the type and frequency of behaviors that a mother displayed when interacting with her child at separation and reunion. Results demonstrated relationships between maternal separation anxiety and maternal behavior at reunion. Mothers reporting high separation anxiety and who utilized child care on a less than full-time basis displayed more frequent physically and verbally affectionate behaviors with their children as compared to high anxious/full-time child care mothers. These results suggest that situational and dispositional variables may combine to influence maternal behavior at reunion with the child. The relationships between self-reported maternal separation anxiety and maternal behavior at reunion demonstrated in this study support the validity of the maternal separation anxiety construct.

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Introduction

Maternal separation anxiety is defined as an unpleasant emotional state resulting from a separation experience. It may be manifested by feelings of worry, sadness, or guilt in the mother (Hock, McBride, & Gnezda, 1989). Mothers have been observed to behave differently from each other during mother-child separations and reunions. Previous research has shown that separation anxiety influences maternal behavior (McBride & Belsky, 1988), attitudes about employment (Hock et al., 1989), and employment decisions made by mothers (Weinberg & Ridley-Johnson, 1991).

According to Benedek (1970), both too much and too little concern about separation reflects disturbances in the mother's psychological well-being and interferes with the development of the mother-child relationship. Thus, some level of maternal separation anxiety is appropriate. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between maternal separation anxiety and the number of hours a mother is away from her child due to outside employment.

Method

Mothers and children were recruited at two urban child care centers. The sample consisted of 44 mothers and their children who ranged in age from 12 to 41 months. All mothers were observed at their respective child care centers on a daily basis as they dropped-off and picked-up their children. The frequencies of maternal behaviors which included hugs, kisses, touches, smiles, caregiving, statements of affection, talking, and positive verbalizations were recorded. Behavioral data was collected on four occasions and mothers were given the Maternal Separation Anxiety Scale (MSAS; Hock et al., 1989) and a background questionnaire to complete.

Results

Significant results were observed at mother-child reunion only. A 2 (high- or low- maternal separation anxiety score) X 2 (full- or less than full-time child care) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the physically affectionate behavior composite revealed a significant interaction between maternal separation anxiety and full- or less than full-time child care $F(1,40) = 6.93$, $p < .01$. A post-hoc Scheffe analysis revealed that mothers who reported high anxiety and utilized child care less than full-time displayed more physically affectionate behaviors than high anxious mothers who utilized child care full-time, $p < .10$ (See Table 1 and Figure 1).

A 2 X 2 ANOVA on the verbally affectionate behavior composite revealed a significant interaction between maternal separation anxiety and full- or less than full-time child care $F(1,40) = 7.71$, $p < .01$. A post-hoc Sheffe analysis revealed that high anxious mothers who utilized child care less than full-time displayed more verbally affectionate behaviors than high anxious mothers who utilized child care full-time, $p < .10$ (See Table 1 and Figure 2).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Reunion Frequency Behaviors as a Function of High or Low Maternal Separation Anxiety and Full- or Less Than Full-Time Child Care Hours

	High/Less	Low/Full	Low/Less	High/Full
Physical Affection	M=2.22 SD=0.76	M=1.80 SD=0.92	M=1.31 SD=0.86	M=1.08 SD=0.76
Verbal Affection	M=1.39 SD=1.24	M=1.15 SD=1.13	M=0.73 SD=0.60	M=0.33 SD=0.44

Figure 1

Relationship of Means for Reunion Physically Affectionate Behavior as a Function of High or Low Maternal Separation Anxiety and Full- or Less Than Full-Time Child Care

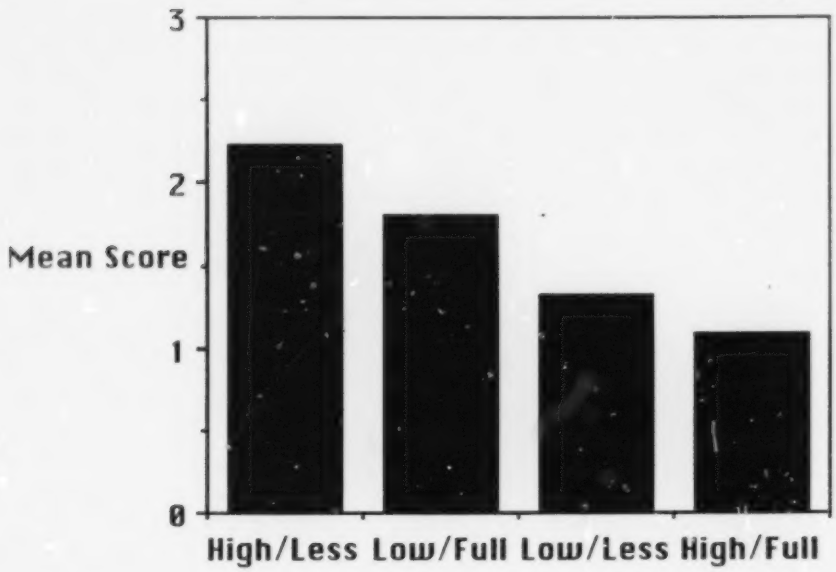

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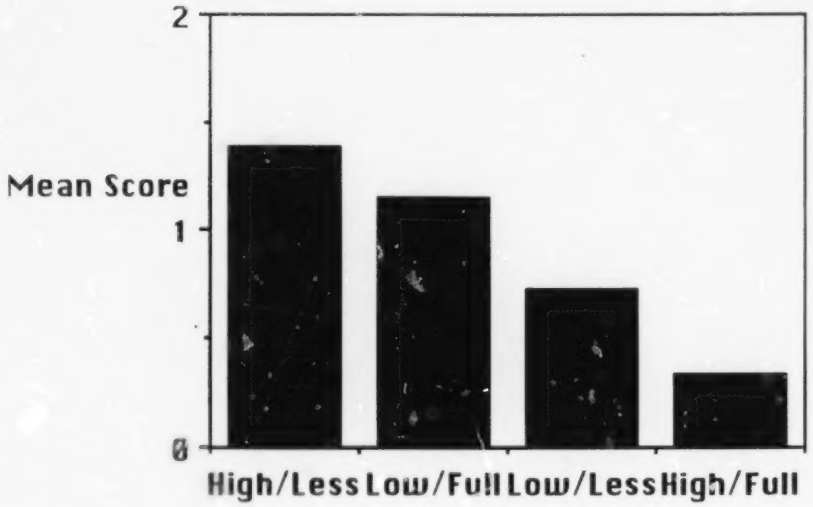
Figure 2

Relationship of Means for Reunion Verbally Affectionate Behavior as a Function of High or Low Maternal Separation Anxiety and Full- or Less Than Full-Time Child Care



Discussion

The interest of this study was in examining the relationship between maternal separation anxiety and situational variables such as the amount of time a mother was away from her child due to outside employment. Maternal separation anxiety and employment associated variables were found to be related to the behaviors a mother displayed when returning to her child. In accordance with Hock et al. (1989), maternal separation anxiety should be considered a specific maternal characteristic; however, certain situational variables may play a role in how that anxiety is expressed. Thus, even though maternal separation anxiety seems to be stable within individuals over time, situational characteristics may increase or decrease the manifestation of maternal separation anxiety.

In examining this study, it may be hypothesized that the disposition of maternal separation anxiety and the child care situation combine to affect maternal behaviors at reunion. This may explain the direction of effects found in the analyses. The self-reported high maternal separation anxious mothers who utilized child care on a less than full-time basis may have been evidencing an anxious disposition, thereby resulting in the most frequent number of behavioral manifestations of anxiety at reunion. Conversely, mothers reporting high separation anxiety and full-time child care may have displayed the least frequent number of affectionate behaviors (physical and verbal) at reunion because of the combination of both their anxious disposition and the situational effects of full-time child care. These mothers may have been overaroused and, to cope with this, they may have inhibited or suppressed their behavioral manifestations of anxiety.

This study lends support to the construct validity of maternal separation anxiety, as well as demonstrating its complexity. In addition, it seems that the number of hours the mothers utilized child care influenced the expression of affectionate behaviors in high anxious mothers at reunion with their children. This study provides evidence that

anxiety level alone is not enough to explain maternal behavior; situational variables must also be considered as they influence the expression of maternal separation anxiety through behavior.

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